

**High-Level Meeting on Roma and Travelers**  
**Remarks by Ambassador Janez Lenarčič, ODIHR Director**

**Strasbourg, 20 October 2010**

Secretary-General,

Excellencies,

Almost seven years ago, the Foreign Ministers of the OSCE participating States adopted a comprehensive framework for improving the situation of Roma and Sinti in Europe. The 2003 Action Plan is arguably the most **far-reaching** and detailed Roma-related policy document at the international level.

It covers, in 139 paragraphs, all aspects that are of importance in ensuring that Roma and Sinti people are able to play, without discrimination, a full and equal part in our societies. This includes education, housing, access to social services, political participation and many other areas. With the Action Plan, we have a road map on how to improve the situation of Roma and Sinti.

I mention this because there clearly is **no shortage** of commitments, declarations, guidance and expressions of good intentions with regard

to Roma and Sinti. The problem is, as we all know, that they are poorly implemented, or not at all.

Progress in integrating Europe's Roma populations has indeed been minimal and often does not extend beyond the adoption of legal frameworks and policies. A **status report** published by our office in 2008 found that too often integrative efforts fail because of a lack of political will at the national level, and because of a failure to implement policies at the local level.

In one word, Roma today are not better off than a decade ago. Recent events in a number of states illustrate the huge gaps that still divide Roma communities from mainstream society in virtually all areas of life. And they illustrate how Roma and Sinti continue to be the target of **stigmatization, discrimination and hate crimes**.

Time and again, they have to pay the price for politicians trying to make capital by stirring up public anger against the Roma.

What is the reason for this **patent failure** to make progress in integrating Roma communities? There appears to be a real lack of proactive approaches at the national, regional and local level, as well as

insufficient efforts to ensure the **sustainability of policies** through the allocation of adequate financial support and institutional and human resources.

Data on the situation of Roma and Sinti is often incomplete and not systematically collected. This, in turn, negatively impacts on the design of Roma-related policies and their effective implementation and evaluation.

Another important factor is the emergence of what can be described as a climate of **intolerance** against Roma. What we are seeing in some countries is that anti-Roma hate speech is shifting from “traditional” prejudice to outright racist attitudes. Anti-Roma rhetoric seems to **pay off politically** and attracts votes. Today, not even mainstream parties are immune from using anti-Roma rhetoric for short-term political gain – something that would not have been tolerated only a couple of years ago.

Another challenge we face today is the **cross-border migration** of Roma and Sinti communities. We can only tackle this challenge if we address the push factors and, at the same time, fight discrimination against and ill-treatment of Roma migrants. State actions against them in some States, including deportations and offers of voluntary-return

assistance, raise multiple concerns regarding the legality of the measures taken and their non-discriminatory nature. This concerns both EU citizens of Roma origin and third-country nationals, mainly Roma from the Western Balkans.

Discrimination has a devastating impact on the opportunities of minorities to integrate into mainstream society. Nowhere else can this be seen more clearly than in the area of education. **Discriminatory practices in education systems** persist across Europe. The main concern is the overrepresentation of Roma children in special-education facilities. Our Office has urged governments to eradicate this discriminatory and socially costly practice as a matter of urgency.

**Education** is crucial for making progress in the social inclusion and integration of Roma communities, and OSCE Ministers have underlined this many times. However, the situation demands pro-active efforts. Broader information campaigns targeting both educational authorities and Roma and Sinti communities are required. There is an urgent need to raise broader awareness among Roma and Sinti parents on the benefits of early education for their children.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have a plethora of state commitments that can be re-mobilized: beside the OSCE Action Plan, we have EU policy documents and initiatives, including EU Roma Summits, we have Council of Europe recommendations and today's draft "Strasbourg declaration".

But responsible and good governance cannot be about committing to policies and letting them fall into abeyance. Today's high-level meeting should not only have symbolic value in that we demonstrate pan-European co-operation. It should speak of the **concrete benchmarks** we wish to achieve in the short- and medium term.

We must at this point send a strong message to both state authorities and Roma communities. Too often we have seen that programs and priorities at government levels are subject to adaptation, others remain short-lived and unsustainable. Let us confirm unequivocally that we commit to fundamental rights of Roma. And that we shall work, as a priority, towards the implementation of existing commitments.

What is important is to complement and benefit from existing policy documents and initiatives, especially with regard to good practices. It is further important to establish **stronger mechanism for co-ordination** and synergy between activities of international organisations, at a level high enough to have access to decision-makers

at the government level. They could, for instance, meet on a yearly basis and deliver strong calls to States based on their findings.

Further, we need effective mechanism for implementation, also at the regional and the local level by building up monitoring mechanisms of independent audits which focus on outcomes. We must build stronger transparency mechanism with regard to awarded projects or programs while ensuring the active participation of Roma in the strategy design and implementation processes.

In this work, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights – and its Contact Point for Roma and Sinti – stands ready to assist.

Thank you